

WEED-SEED FREE FORAGE

Certified Weed-Seed Free Forage

Dawn Rafferty from the Nevada Department of Agriculture tromps through fields of alfalfa hay and wheat straw, keeping her eyes peeled for noxious weeds that are just about to go to seed.

If Rafferty finds noxious weeds with seed heads, she will not certify the crop as weed-free. If the noxious weeds haven't formed seed heads, she lets the farmer know what measures to take to eventually get a weed-free certification for his crop.

The state's new weed-free certification process is part of a larger effort among federal, state and county agencies to promote the use of certified weed free forage throughout the West, according to Ted Angle, BLM Nevada's state weed program coordinator. Species like tall whitetop, yellow starthistle, leafy spurge, and many of the knapweeds are displacing native vegetation, destroying wildlife habitat and reducing grazing capacity.

Last year, Rafferty inspected 2,800 acres from eight farms throughout Nevada. For each inspection, she walks or drives slowly around every field, looking for noxious weeds.

"Every ten acres, I walk 150 feet into the field," said Rafferty. "We don't accept stack inspections—the forage crop must be inspected in the field."

Fields that are free of noxious weeds are certified right away, according to Rafferty. Inspections must take place within 10 days of harvest. The inspection fee is \$50, plus \$20 per hour for travel and inspection time.

Earlier this year, BLM Nevada published a preliminary environmental assessment (EA) on a proposal to allow only weed-seed free forage on public lands, Angle said. The next step is to prepare a final EA. Publication of the final EA, along with a decision record and final supplemental rule in the Federal Register, are pending.

Forage used on BLM lands in Nevada includes alfalfa hay, wheat straw and mulch. Persons that could be affected by the proposed rule include recreationists

and outfitters using pack and saddle stock, ranchers with grazing permits, as well as contractors and operators who use straw or other mulch for re-seeding or reclamation purposes.

BLM Nevada buys rice straw from Idaho and California for emergency fire rehabilitation erosion control. The rice straw is certified weed-seed free, and the rice seed will not germinate in the high desert. Rice straw is placed in drainage areas in the form of bales, mats and wattles.

The Nevada Department of Agriculture operates the state hay inspection-certification program on a limited basis, according to Rafferty. Participation in the weed-free program is voluntary for hay growers. Growers may call the State of Nevada's Department of Agriculture at (775) 688-1180 for information on certification.

Additional information is available at the Nevada Weed Action Committee's (NWAC) web site:

<http://agri.state.nv.us/nwac/weedfreehay.htm>

—Richard Brown
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Straw bales in a drainage area near Carlin help control erosion after the 1999 Rose Fire. The straw bales are certified weed-seed free rice straw, which will not germinate in high desert conditions.